

Does Military Service Contribute to Homelessness?

From a survey of 631 homeless veterans, VISN 1 MIRECC researchers found that most do not blame military service for their current predicament. Fewer than one-third reported that military service increased their risk for homelessness and only 13% said that military service was “very much” to blame. The most common aspects of military service identified were substance abuse problems that began before the military, inadequate preparation for civilian employment and loss of a structured lifestyle on return to civilian life. In addition, the average lag time between military discharge and homelessness was 14 years and only 8% became homeless within one year of discharge. This study is the most recent in a series of MIRECC reports on causes of homelessness in veterans. The rates of homelessness vary dramatically across different eras of military service. While veterans of World War II and the Korean War are about 40% less likely to be homeless than non-veterans, veterans of Vietnam are about 40% more likely to be homeless and post-Vietnam veterans are two to four times more likely to be homeless. Risk for homelessness does not appear to be related to combat exposure. Homelessness is less common among Vietnam veterans exposed to combat fire than among Vietnam veterans out of the combat zone. Also, the stigma of “bad conduct” military discharge appears to play a minimal role as only 7% of homeless veterans received other than honorable discharges. The dramatically increased risk among post-Vietnam veterans is largely explained by the transition to the All Volunteer Force and the recruitment of military personnel who had poorer prospects in the civilian labor force. Taken together, these research findings suggest that military service itself does not substantially increase the risk for becoming homeless among veterans. Even those reasons reported in the survey- substance abuse, inadequate preparation for civilian life and loss of structured lifestyle- do not represent active adverse effects of military service. MIRECC researchers Alvin Mares and Robert Rosenheck conducted this study.